

Magnolia Miles

by Von Cedriec Abuloc

The magnolia flower, with its grand petals and gentle hues, is a symbol of dignity, perseverance, and beauty. It blooms proudly in the early days of spring, each blossom opening like a whispered promise. Over the course of days, its vibrant colors soften and fade, a quiet reminder that all things, even the brightest loves, are touched by time.

Bud Whisper

*The magnolia flower is its tight little shell, holding all its promise of color in a hush -
A tension before the bloom.*

Chapter 1

It was an early Saturday morning in a quiet town in the province of Bukidnon. The sun hadn't yet shown its lovely face over the plains where I was raised. Some of my classmates had invited me for a morning game of basketball at the local court. I was glad they did. For once, I felt *seen*—especially now that I had just started high school.

See, I was the kind of kid raised to be academically inclined. The goal was always to excel—whether it was a regional competition or something as simple as an exam on a Tuesday morning. Sure, I had a childhood, but most of it was spent buried in schoolbooks rather than playing outside with neighbors or classmates.

Starting high school was terrifying. New town kids, new classmates, and more eyes that didn't know who I was. So, when they invited me to play, despite knowing I'd only played a few games in my life, I took it as a sign. Maybe it was time to step out of the classroom and into the world—to experience more than just lessons and lecture notes.

I got out of bed, ate a few slices of bread, and drank my chocolate drink. Slipped into my jogging pants and a dry-fit shirt—I was still hella shy and insecure about wearing a jersey—and grabbed the basketball my grandfather had gifted me and my brother. Then I headed out.

It was still early when I arrived at the court, so I started with a few free throws and a bit of a shootaround. For someone just starting out, I think I was doing alright. Then my classmates arrived.

“Kier, sayo lagi ka.”

(Kier, you're a bit early.)

“Lagi, nakasayo ko'g mata pero nag-shooting na lang pud.”

(Yeah, I woke up early, so I just started shooting around.)

“Unya, ready na ka?”

(So, are you ready?)

“Kulba gamay, pero kaya ra.”

(A bit nervous, but I think I can do it.)

“Kaya ra na nimo, maayo bitaw ka.”

(You got this. You're actually good.)

Now, don't let my voice fool you—I was more than scared. I had chills running down my arms, and not because of the morning cold. I was terrified I might let them down, that I might embarrass them for choosing me as a teammate. But I reminded myself: *I showed up. I'm here. Might as well play the best I can.*

We teamed up with some of the bigger guys and got the game going. At first, Jason—my teammate—and I weren't even getting our hands on the ball. I get it. Big guys didn't trust small guys to make plays. That's just how it was back then in our town. Maybe even in that whole era.

But when we finally got our chances, we made 'em count. We played like hell.

Scored a couple baskets. Earned our place.

Mid-game, the score was around 10-12. The other team had a slight edge—just a two-point lead that a three-pointer could erase. The ball kept moving, both sides scrambling, but no one was scoring.

That's when I noticed a group of girls walking onto the court, settling on the cement benches. Most seemed like casual spectators. But there was one girl—one—who stopped my world.

She wore a light purple shirt with darker purple sleeves, shorts, and flip-flops. Something in her hand—maybe a phone, or maybe a handkerchief. But it wasn't what she wore that held me—it was her eyes.

She had full bangs, shoulder-length hair, and puffy cheeks that looked like they caught laughter before it escaped. And those eyes? They looked like they'd been painted by Da Vinci himself. I didn't stare long, but Lord... it felt like forever.

She was as radiant as an angel could be.

But I shook myself out of the trance and turned back to the game.

When the ball was back on our side of the court, Jason passed it to me. I was standing just outside the three-point line. I took a breath, aimed, and let it fly. Just as I released it, I heard a girl's voice shout—

“SHOT!”

The ball sank cleanly through the hoop—rimless.

I turned around, startled, trying to spot who said it. I figured it must've been one of the girls sitting on the bench, but I couldn't tell who. So, I just smiled to myself and kept on playing.

We won that game, 21-20.

It wasn't anything grand—just a few high-fives and a round of "good game" all around. I figured that was enough basketball for the day and told Jason thanks before heading out, ball tucked under my arm.

By the time I left the court, the girls had already gone ahead. I didn't know where they were headed—and told myself I didn't really care.

Walking home, I passed by the municipal park with its neatly landscaped gardens, the proud statue of a stallion—the town's symbol—and the ever-watchful figure of Jose Rizal.

That's when I saw them again.

A group of girls giggling and taking photos inside the gazebo across the park. It was the same group from the court. And there she was—the girl with the Da Vinci eyes.

This time, she looked at me.

And when she did, I quickly looked away and kept walking.

Like I didn't feel anything.

Like my chest wasn't thumping like sneakers on concrete.

As I walked home, I kept asking myself—what was that look? Was it curiosity? Recognition? Or just plain coincidence? Half of me wanted to know, if only for curiosity's sake. The other half wanted to leave it alone. I chose the latter. I was just a boy heading home after a fulfilling game of basketball. There were plenty of guys out there—more handsome, more athletic—surely it wasn't me she'd taken notice of.

But you know how the mind wanders when the heart starts beating to its own rhythm. It plays a looping sonata of unsolved mysteries. Her glance. That voice that cried out, “SHOT!” Maybe it was her. Maybe she had taken an interest in me.

No. Don’t be silly. That’s reaching for a star that’s light-years away. She probably just got caught up in the game like any normal person in the crowd.

I kept walking until the park blurred behind me, the gravel road softening into earth, and the early sun stretched over everything like a golden veil. It felt fitting—I really did have a good morning. And as the light began to bathe the world around me, I felt it—that little jolt of hope. That maybe, just maybe, I’d see her again.

I didn’t know her name. I didn’t know where she lived, who she was, or whether she had truly looked at me with interest. Logic told me it was a once-in-a-lifetime moment. The universe’s soft nudge, whispering that life can be beautiful in the most unexpected ways.

But bloody me—I was hard-headed.

When I got home, I peeled off my shirt—drenched in the sweat of a teenage boy who gave the morning his all—and hung it up outside to dry. The house smelled like fried garlic and morning chatter. Mom was already up, moving around the kitchen with that usual rhythm of hers, flipping something in the pan.

“Kuya, kumusta ang dula?” she asked without looking up.

How was the game?

“Okay ra,” I replied, grabbing a glass of water. “Lingaw kay naa si Jason didto. Unya nakashot pud ko ug pila.”

It was okay. I had fun ‘cause Jason was there, and I got to shoot a couple.

She smiled, pleased. "Wow, at least gakaapil na ka sa ilang mga dula. Lingkod sa ug kaon."

Wow, at least you're playing with the guys now. Sit down and eat.

I didn't tell her about the girl. I mean, why would I? She was just someone I happened to lock eyes with during a game. It's not like we even spoke. But still... that look—those eyes—kept showing up in my head like the lingering scent of someone else's perfume.

Jeez. Is this how love starts?

Nope. Definitely not. Just plain ol' infatuation and teenage overthinking.

I wolfed down my second breakfast like a proud Hobbit—*be proud, Pippin*—and made my way to my room. I flopped onto the bed, grabbed my battered Android tablet, and did what any proper procrastinator would do: opened Facebook for the memes. Sure, I had Instagram. Reddit too. But Facebook? That's where the real gold lived.

As I scrolled past the usual barrage of cat videos and low-quality screenshots, a red '1' blinked on the message icon.

Someone had messaged me.

Now, I wasn't exactly someone who got messages on the regular—*still ain't*—so I opened it, heart ticking just a little faster than normal.

Hiiiii! Ikaw man tong nagdula ug basketball ganiha diba?

Hiiiii! You were the one who played basketball earlier, right?

Boom.

There it was.

My heart did this little hiccup, skipping between hope and disbelief. Could it be *her*?

The girl with the Mona Lisa mystery eyes?

But my brain, ever the annoying realist, tapped me on the shoulder—*Could be anyone, genius. Don't flatter yourself.*

So I replied, like some awkward customer service rep:

Umm... daghan man mi ganiha nagdula. Naa kay specific nga ginapangita?

Umm... there were a lot of us playing earlier. Are you looking for someone specific?

Reading that message again makes me cringe a little. Too formal. Too stiff. Like I was applying for a job, not talking to a potential crush. But hey—it was already out there.

And the wait began.

I pushed it aside and went back to my usual habit — scrolling through Filipino memes like a true procrastinator. Just a few minutes passed when that little red badge lit up again, blinking insistently.

If it was her, I didn't expect such a quick reply. And if it was a group chat, well, they were sure too lively this early in the morning. Could've been anyone, really.

Still, I opened the inbox.

What I read next confirmed the mix of hope and doubt tangled inside me.

Curiosity got the better of me. I opened the inbox.

What I saw next? Well, sugar, that just confirmed every little doubt and hope tangled up inside me.

"Ikaw mang tong naka 3-points diba? Kato akong gishagitan ug SHOT!"

(It was you who shot a 3-pointer, right? The one I shouted 'SHOT!' for!)

Her eyes were like Mona Lisa's—mysterious and full of quiet fire; the kind of beauty that could light up a sleepy Saturday morning, like a lavender fairy come to life.

I didn't reply right away. No, sir. My mind was busy trying to figure out who she really was. So, I clicked her name in the inbox and landed on her profile page.

And I smirked—not because it was funny, but because her name was something downright pretty. Or maybe... I was just head-over-heels already.

Her name?

Vesper Kassandra Alvarez.